

MARGOLIS: And Jonathan thank you so much for speaking with me about your upcoming book. I want to start by asking you, in your book, you articulate with vivid detail, the ways in which compliance-based schooling, which is especially prevalent in schools that serve black and brown students, harms students and their teachers.

Can you offer an overview of the book and what do you want readers to know? And most importantly, what do you want people to do after we read your book?

KOZOL: Well, before we get into the other issues, I'd like to make clear right from the start that my forthcoming book, *An End of Inequality* is not as soft and gentle as some of my earlier books.

It's a direct confrontation with the racist status quo in US education, especially at a time when racial segregation in the schools is at the highest level since I was a young teacher. Even worse, a disparate agenda, as I call it, what you might call a parallel curriculum, has evolved mostly over the past 25-30 years, which treats the children of the Black and brown and poor as if they were a different species of humanity. And treats them as if they're not able to learn unless they're under the constant fear of failure and a punitive code of discipline.

A lot of people are probably unaware of this, but a code of discipline that includes shaming rituals like: "Shanequa, you're in red zone." It means a bad area; it's a warning code. The discipline that I've seen in inner-city schools also includes lockdown rooms. That is putting a little kid who may have made a minor misbehavior into a hallway closet for several hours where he or she cries for their mother and wants their parents. And maybe worst of all, a frequent recourse to a juvenile arrest, which is wildly disproportionate in racial terms.

Black girls, for example, are 3.6 times as likely as white girls of their age to be hauled off from their school by police and put in at least temporary detention. In the book, I describe a little girl – six years old in Florida who had a little tantrum in her classroom – and she was brought into the nurse's office or the principal's office and somebody started reading a story to her and it calmed her down.

But by that time they had already called the police and the policeman came in and, even though she was calm by now, put her in zip ties and she started crying. And he literally physically dragged her out of the school, pushed her into the back of his police car and took her off to detention. And I remember she was six years old when they took a mug shot of her. Fingerprint and mug shot. She was so little that they had to put her on a step stool in order to take the mug shot. And that's the kind of atrocity that takes place all too frequently as the first stage in the famous "School to Prison Pipeline."

Corporal punishment is still allowed in nearly half the states. And it's most common in the states where lynching was most common.

So that's one part of the story that I tell in the book because, you know, I have so many liberal friends who think themselves progressive, but they're still talking simply about teaching methods. They're kind of unaware of the wild cruelty – what I call the amputation of a child's dignity – which has become so common, not only but especially, in schools with Black children and Latino children.

The book also focuses on severe funding cutbacks that we've suffered in the schools.

And typically what happens is: there's a local economic crisis. So temporarily, they say, “We have to go on an emergency funding basis and repair of schools and so forth is postponed.”

They assure the parents once the economy improves, we'll restore it all. They almost never do. So it goes on and on and on, and it leaves the buildings in ugly disrepair.

I just think schools ought to be beautiful places. Every day ought to be like a treasure of learning in a life-affirming setting. And instead, these ugly buildings are frequently lead-infested. We've been warned for decades that lead poison causes irreversible cerebral damage, especially in a young child. But that goes on and on and on.

They always say, “We're gonna fix it.” But then there's another funding crisis of some sort. There's always this pretense – I call it the myth of scarcity – that we're a third-world country. You know, we can't afford to send in a team of people to get rid of the lead and put some cheerful pictures on the wall.

Another consequence of the funding shortage, which really amounts to an attack on the public sector, is the loss of school librarians and school libraries, which have been disappearing over the past 20-30 years. Same with art, music teachers since No Child Left Behind and the miserable Common Core – I call it miserable because it famously discourages children from doing any writing that has to do with their feelings, their emotions.

The other aspect of this is that this tough agenda has denied teachers in many schools, almost all of their autonomy. So, a teacher who has a lovely creative style is sort of frozen out.

I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Just a short distance to the north is a very poor industrial town called Lawrence, Massachusetts. Lawrence is now overwhelmingly Black and Puerto Rican and the state, you know, has never considered integrating the kids in Lawrence with three or four very well-funded districts that immediately surround it. They're close and it's an area where there's not much traffic, so it would be easy to do.

Instead of any possibility of integrating those kids, they brought in a private corporation, so-called teacher trainers. And this teacher, this Lawrence teacher for the sixth grade, her class was invaded by three of these teacher coaches who are sent in by private corporation. They're sent to the school in order to retrain the teachers to be more severe.

And they sat in the back row of her classroom and one of them spoke to her while she was teaching, one of them spoke to her through an earpiece that she had to wear. And he gave her instructions and said things like, "You look too happy."

They warned her that she wasn't to lift one leg higher than the other. She was instructed to stand in "mountain pose." Now, I'm not very cool. So I don't know exactly what that refers to, but it doesn't sound much like Mister Rogers to me.

You know, some little boy spoke out of turn and she was told through an earpiece, "Give him detention." So one of the little kids in the class, I think it was a boy, stood up out of his chair – a little guy with an independent spirit, nice irreverence – he said, "What's that thing in your ear, teacher?" And the coaches kept talking. The boy said, "Don't listen to that miss, be a person. Be you."

I love it. He said, "Be you." He said, "I'm a person too." And I just love that. I thought, instead of a detention, that little boy ought to get a prize. I wish that spirit, that healthy spirit of irreverence, I just wish that were an acceptable goal of public education, especially in a nation where we're faced with all kinds of dogmatic tyrannies right now.

I just think almost more than anything, we don't just need well-skilled products from our schools. We also need morally irreverent citizens in the United States – not violent, not destructive, not cruel but capable of challenging any evil that's right in front of their eyes. You don't need more studies from universities. These things are too obvious.

You asked me once, why I tend to focus on conservatives in my critique of the public system. Well, partly just because far, right-wing political people have been among the strongest voices perpetuating the dual system.

But the truth is, I don't limit my focus to conservatives. I also focus on what I would call timid semi-liberals, neo-Libs, as the media calls them, who say the right things.

But in reality, they turn their backs totally on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King and the promises of Brown. And with some notable exceptions of which I'm very proud when there are exceptions. I describe one, a wonderful urban-suburban integration program where the parents in the suburbs have been great, have actually transcended all the limits of a racist society, and have made these kids welcome and successful.

But with that exception, an awful lot of liberals I know, like right in New York City, get nervous when people talk about integrating their school on the Upper West Side, which is a mainly white and fairly wealthy area with schools, maybe just five, 10 blocks to the north in Harlem, in West Harlem.

It's too easy to blame it on mad followers of Donald Trump. If that were the only problem, I would feel hopeful that we could lick it somehow – just go ahead and get more people like you to run for office.

But it's not just that. It's a system that's been frozen into place and I don't think it's gonna change if we have another couple of years of so-called conversations about race, which are almost self-congratulatory. They're too easy.

I think we need militant action. It's my final book given my age and I won't live to see this, but I would love to see another wave of passionate civil disobedience on the part of kids staging walkouts from a truly destructive and brutal school. Or teachers and children together.

I don't think you can just write a letter to your congress member. I think we need much more militant action. You know, if I'm still alive, I'll go out in the streets and join it.

MARGOLIS: Oh, Jonathan, thank you. Everything you said has been so important.

So I want to ask you a little more about the self-described “liberal education reformer” folks and I'm going to connect this question to the earpiece because I know about the earpiece thing. Probably 10 or 15 years ago at Inspired Teaching, we had a funder who was super progressive, caring about the issues that you and I care about.

They were super excited about the earpiece. And as you know, at Inspired Teaching, a lot of the work we do is exchanging feedback: teachers giving feedback to students, students to teachers, and coaches giving feedback to teachers.

And this partner of ours said, “You gotta get these earpieces. We'll grant you, you know, a bunch of earpieces. Isn't this great?”

And we said, well, tell us more and the more we learned, we concluded as you did that, you know, this is a horrible idea, right?

But that idea of the earpiece is marketed still today using all the words you and I believe in: meaningful, real-time feedback, respect for the teacher, respect for the child, “it's place-based coaching,” and it sounds great. So I think those guys, our colleagues – lots of folks that you and I know who are out there focused on education and high-quality teaching and equity – are in fact, boiling down teaching into these sterile chunks and teacher training moves and summer camp to prep you to become a teacher.

All of these things are perpetuating the problem in the name of equity, in the name of access, in the name of quality. And I would love your advice on how we engage with those guys and what we have to say to them.

KOZOL: I think we need to be very skeptical about these repeated cycles of “reform.”

I've seen maybe 30 cycles of reform in the time since I became a teacher. When I was, I mean, in the 1960s, when I was teaching fourth grade in one of Boston's classic segregated schools, which I described in my first book, there was a new reform.

It was aimed at minority kids. It was called Operation Counterpoise. And it was stated that it was to counteract the liabilities of black families – you know, their supposed cultural incapacity.

Anyway, that came and 10 years later, it was gone forever.

But by that time, there was a whole row of new reforms. There were “schools of quality.” “Quality” became a favorite word as though education was you know, like a quality washing product or something like a quality light bulb. And when that didn't work, the same group started a program called *Total Quality Education* that was borrowed from, I think some business theory.

And then there were Renaissance Schools. There were Schools of Excellence. I once came out of a school in the Bronx which was – it had a name, but under the name – it said School of Excellence. And there's this little boy that I really got to like and I said, "What's that mean?" And he said, "Oh, that means we're excellent!" And then he said, "...and also good."

I thought that was so funny. It just showed that it meant nothing.

Then there was the whole thing around NCLB, No Child Left Behind, and then the Common Core. And now I notice the Common Core has almost disappeared; only a few districts take it seriously anymore. I call it a deception. It's like a way of lying to poor children or to their parents as if to say, "We didn't know it worked until just now. But here at this university we just figured it out now. We know what works."

And I think there have been books even with titles like that: *What Works*, as though people were too dumb for the past 2000 years to figure it out. But we just figured it out and we turned it into 10 units of teaching and we're sending it to your school and you better teach it.

I think we need a massive wave of skepticism about stuff like that. I think what matters is that the teacher has a reasonably small class size in a safe and cheerful setting that he or she is given a maximum chance – that she has a sense of joy about getting up on Monday morning and going there and "It's gonna be an adventure!" She and the children are going to explore the world. They're going to explore their own possibilities.

They're going to not just study history but prepare to shape it themselves when they are 20 years older. Teaching and learning ought to be an adventure. And that's what I fight for.

People always say I sound like an unregenerate version of my dear old friend, Fred Rogers. You know, I haven't outgrown my fondness for him and his values. But as I say in the book, if that's the accusation against me, I don't take it as an insult. I think that Mr Rogers – if we're looking for models for teachers of young children – I love Fred Rogers before any of these tough guys with their penalties and paddles.

Of course, I'm biased because I really loved him and had the joy of visiting schools with him, seeing him squeeze his bottom into those little tiny chairs in kindergarten and first grade. And I noticed he had a great gift of listening to children. He would elicit unexpected things too. I don't know how he did it but I tried to copy him as best I could. We need to teach our teachers to have a chance to do more listening.

MARGOLIS: Jonathan, will you speak more about that, listening? I know that that is so very important and it's a critical part of the work we do in teacher professional learning is literally teaching teachers how to listen. I think we have this almost like this logic problem we're trapped in.

We are all a product of the education system that taught us to think short term, that taught us to sit quietly until we're called on and say the right thing, and then be quiet again until the next time we're called on. And so we bring that into the classroom. And you're saying, "Don't use corporal punishment, don't use shame. Don't use rote meaningless amputated versions of learning." And we say the same at Inspired Teaching.

And so what we often hear back is like, "Ok, you're taking away all my tools. If I can't yell at the kids and I can't hit the kids and I can't put the kids in detention and I can't call the police and I can't do the worksheet instead of reading the novel, what do I do?" That's a question we often hear. Part of the answer is listening. I'd love to hear more from you on offering our teaching colleagues who want to make the change, offering them something to hold on to, some steps that they can take.

KOZOL: Well, first of all, I think part of the problem starts with traditional teacher education.

Now, I don't want to antagonize all my good friends in schools of education because some of them are wonderful, and besides, they invite me to speak so they must have good taste, I like to think.

But, the problem with teacher education is it's far too mechanistic and limited too much to things like strategies: strategies of control, strategies of delivering vowel sounds or something. And it's not that I'm opposed to phonics, by the way. I don't want to make more enemies. I used to teach phonics. Actually, I have no problem with phonics as long as it's interwoven with wonderful books. You know, an intelligent use of phonics makes absolute sense to me.

Back to teachers about listening.

I think it starts in teacher education. I think faculties in our schools of education need to elicit more from the would-be teachers by asking about: What do they love? Why do they want to be with children? Do they have a sense of humor? Are they able to laugh and smile at something that's annoying but kinda screwy – of which there's a lot in the public system?

I also think the education given in many schools of education seems to lack real exposure to the liberal arts and humanities. Not much poetry. I think a future teacher of reading would benefit more from falling in love with poetry, taking a great poetry course not in the school of Ed, but in another department of the university, like in the English Department, and courses in Philosophy and Ethics. So they'd be more broadly educated in areas that kind of free the soul from constraint. That's what I believe.

You know, we're at a moment in history where everything is supposed to be *science* and *scientific*. One of the newest reform cults includes the word "scientific learning." Yes, science is obviously important in the age of interplanetary travel and it's also sadly very useful in the military in terms of armaments and sophisticated ways of killing people.

But I think without a rich immersion in the treasures of our culture and other cultures that I mentioned before, I don't think they will be able to broaden their personalities and self-confidence. I think it takes a kind of cultural self-confidence to be able to shut up and listen to a child.

You know, one reason Fred Rogers was so good at that was that he was himself a beautifully educated person.

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MARGOLIS: And I think we as adults – and that includes teachers and parents – often feel if we're in the presence of children and we're not speaking – or one of my favorite words to critique, "delivering" something – to our young people, we're not doing our job. And it takes great confidence as an adult to listen to a young person. And also to say, "Wow, that's really interesting. I didn't know that. Tell me more," because we tend to be taught that we're supposed to know everything. I'm the teacher; I know everything.

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KOZOL: Especially with young children I think we should do everything possible to indulge their curiosity and their unpredictable curiosities, even when they threaten to take us on a detour that wasn't predicted in our lesson plan. Not to be scared or say, "Oh my God, how will I ever get back to that item three and my lesson plan for today?" Just don't worry, do it tomorrow.

MARGOLIS: I think that's so true and as you know, in my work with teachers, it's based on improvisation. Because the idea is an improvisational actor has a clear goal and welcomes all the crazy stuff that comes in and incorporates it. So, you incorporate your kids'

off-the-wall comments, and questions, and ideas, and you value those instead of batting them away. But that takes a different approach to teaching.

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KOZOL: Everything you say strikes a familiar note with me. I've always hated the term "delivery of skills," as if we were working for FedEx or UPS. OK, I'll deliver a consonant blend to that little girl. I think "develop" is maybe a better verb than deliver.

MARGOLIS: "Teach" is also a pretty good verb in that situation.

KOZOL: Yeah, I do think at the heart of many of our problems now that it's not just that corporate invasion of schools of education. By corporate invasion I mean, a lot of teachers tell me that when they were in Ed school three years ago or whatever, they were taking a course that was based on a grant from some big corporation. It had strings attached to it. You know, like a lot of stuff about, I don't know, some specific things about what expectations must be demanded of children at a particular age in the third month of the second grade or something like that. So the corporations have been invading too much of life, too much of ordinary life in the United States, but especially in the public schools.

But at heart, in the long run, wholly apart from the physical condition of a school – which I do believe is extremely important because I think a dreary ugly school with water leaks in the ceiling and so forth soils the mentalities of children. It robs them of their sense of being little blessings to us. It's as though they were throwaways, put them over there in that ugly building.

But apart from the physical issues, my book really puts a lot of emphasis on returning dignity to teachers. And the goal of teacher education ought to encourage teachers to be as exciting and adaptable and always curious and not tyrannical and not feel bound to follow tyrannical instructions. That means ultimately trying to fill our public schools with wonderful human beings and not just well-trained dutiful technicians of mechanical proficiencies. People who can inflame excitement about learning in children.

There's an old phrase – you've probably heard it a hundred times. It's sometimes attributed to the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, but I actually think it originally came from the Greek or Roman classics. And it was essentially this: Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

If there is a message, that's perhaps the ultimate message of my book.